DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 842 PS 014 439

AUTHOR Purnell, Richard F.; Gotts, Edward E.
TITLE An Approach for Improving Parent Involvement through More Effective School-Home Communications.
PUB DATE 13 Dec 83
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (New Orleans, LA, December, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Family School Relationship; *Interpersonal Communication; Interviews; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Participation; Parent Responsibility; *Parent School Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

A total of 66 families from one high school and 64 families from another were randomly selected from school records to participate in telephone interviews regarding school/home communications. Families were selected to represent equal numbers of tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade boys and girls (30 of each sex) from varying urban and rural socioeconomic levels. Fifteen- to 20-minute telephone interviews, composed of structured and open-ended questions, sought to document parents' (1) perceptions of school/home communication practices, (2) reactions to the practices, (3) suggestions for improved practices, and (4) views of what practices might work at the secondary level. Findings indicated that parents reacted positively to receiving two types of information from the schools: newsletters detailing the school's program and extracurricular events and notification that their child was experiencing difficulty or needed assistance. They expressed a desire to help under the latter circumstances but were not highly resourceful regarding kinds of actions to consider. Findings suggested that schools need to provide guidance to parents in helping their children with difficulties at school. (BJD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

PS

ED245842

AN APPROACH FOR IMPROVING PARENT INVOLVEMENT THROUGH MORE EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATIONS

Richard F. Purnell, Ph.D.
Department of Education
University of Rhode Island
Kingston, Rhode Island 02881

Edward E. Gotts, Ph.D.
Division of Childhood and Parenting
Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc.
Charleston, West Virginia 25325

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard F. Purnell
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
New Orleans, December 13, 1983 in
the symposium "Parent Involvement
in the School" by the first
author.

PS 014439

An Approach For Improving Parent Involvement Through More Effective School-Home Communications

Richard F. Purnell, Ph.D.
University of Rhode Island

Edward E. Gotts, Ph.D.
Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc.

Introduction

This paper is about an approach that has been developed to improve school-home communications. In it we briefly describe what we mean by school-home communications, and present and discuss some of the reasons for being concerned about this issue. Following that, we outline the problem, describe an approach for dealing with the problem, and present some of the results of applying that approach.

Problem

To begin with, school-home communications takes place when the school transmits a message to the home and that message is received as intended. Moreover, home-school communications occurs when the message is transmitted from the home and received by the school as intended. Interactive communications of either an episodic or an ongoing nature are also possible.

Schools have numerous occasions for communicating to the home about the child's: academic progress, attendance, homework assignments, classroom conduct, special needs that are identified, progress toward graduation, career and other postsecondary planning, interest, and motivation. For discussion purposes, we will refer to the foregoing as Type 1 (Individual) communications.

The school also has need to communicate to the home about its overall program: PTA/PTO, scheduled parent-teacher conference times, curriculum em-

phasis, student expectations, standards for conduct, discipline codes, grading and attendance policies, extracurricular programs and events, opportunities for volunteer service, special circumstances facing local schools -- the list goes on (Gotts, 1983a). We refer to these collectively as Type S (School) communications.

There are abundant signs that strongly suggest the need for schools to re-examine their style of communicating to the home about Type I and Type S matters. Let us look at a few of these signs to try to gain a sense of the problem.

For example, Lightfoot (1978) has studied "Relationships between Families and Schools" and written about her work in a book aptly titled Worlds Apart. Among other things, she presents and analyzes the results of her interviews with first-grade teachers regarding their views of and communications with parents. One of her observations was that

> Without actually knowing parents, without actually having their point of view, teachers and principals have developed strong negative images of them that justify their exclusion of them from the school process. For instance....the predominant myth about black and poor parents who live in the depressed areas around inner-city schools is that they do not care about the education of their children, are passive and unresponsive to attempts by teachers and administrators to get them involved, and are ignorant and naive about the intellectual and social needs of their children. However, when the parents of black children are questioned about their attitudes toward schooling and their ambitions for their children, not only is education valued, but formalized schooling is often seen as the panacea. (Lightfoot, 1978, p. 35 ff.)

The futurist Alvin Toffler (1980) provides another sign in a chapter on "The Rise of the Prosumer" in his book, The Third Wave, where he observes,

> Teachers' unions typically fight to keep parents out of the classroom with all the zeal of a building tradesman fighting to preserve obsolete building codes. Yet just as a number of health problems (like

> those deriving from overeating, lack of exercise, or smoking, for example) cannot be solved by doctors alone but require instead the active participation of the patient, so a number of educational problems cannot be solved without the parent. (Toffler, 1980, p. 283.)

Toffler's description/prediction was certainly on target if the NEA president's recent comments in the NEA Today are any indication. In her November, 1983 viewpoint column entitled "Parents as Allies," President Mary Hartwood Futrell said,

> ...all of us have to redouble our efforts to welcome every segment of the public into the education community. Community begins with communication. So that's where we have to start. And our first communication must be with parents. (Futrell, 1983, p. 2.)

Moreover, President Futrell went on to qualify that what she means by communication is showing parents that educators understand the "hassles" and "never-ending struggle that is parenthood." She further goes on to say that "---no amount of stress and strain can ever justify parents' asking us to take their place. We cannot. Parents must understand - and understand well (italics added) - that we are allies, not surrogates."

Futrell's viewpoint states that, once educators have communicated their empathy for the parents' plight, "...it is up to parents to support school rules designed to foster an effective environment for teaching and learning." This was one of the prevailing teacher-parent paradigms that Lightfoot (1978) reported finding in her interviews, so one may conclude that Futrell's viewpoint probably has a substantial following among educators.

Toffler's (1980) message that the communication patterns of the industrial society are no longer applicable in the third-wave civilization that is emerging are echoed in another futurist's writings (Naisbitt, 1982). In his Megatrends, Naisbitt tells us that "...in an information society the game is people interacting with other people.... The life channel of the in-

formation age is communication." Both futurists see and foresee decreasing responsiveness to the non-interacting, one-way, authoritarian style of communication (e.g., "parents must understand--and understand well...") because of an increasing functionalism of the more interactive, two-way, partnership style. In the two-way, mutually-exchanging form of communication, that is gaining dominancy, Lightfoot (1978) appropriately cautions that it is "...critical to distinguish between creative conflict and negative dissonance between family and school."

The crux of all this is that schools are experiencing a growing need to change their outlook from one of communicating to parents to one of communicating with parents. Forces are at work bringing about changes in many sectors of our society (particularly the changing American family) and the schools will, to some degree, have to accommodate to those changes if all children are to have a better chance to succeed in school. In this regard, Naisbitt (1982) argues that "...you can't change unless you completely rethink what you are doing, unless you have a wholly new vision of what you are doing." The NEA leader's viewpoint quoted earlier is not a new response to communicating with parents; it is more of the same. It recognizes that there is a need to communicate interactively with parents; but in denying what it should be affirming, it is not willing to take the whole new vision of what is being thrust on educators; and therefore, of what they should be doing relative to families.

Proposed Solution

Well, where does one start to get a handle on the new forms of communication that are going to emerge as the information society unfolds around us? This is one of the key questions that staff of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory's (AEL) School-Family Relations Project have been wrestling with for several years. I will briefly share the thinking, methods, and findings

emanating from their work with you now.

First, Gotts (1983a) recognized that parent involvement in the schools has been going on in numerous forms for some time. Sifting through the parent-involvement literature for the past 20 years yielded two consistent outcomes from studies of these efforts:

> when parent involvement increases, (1) student achievement goes up and (2) support grows for schools. These findings appear in studies at all grades. (Gotts, 1983a, p. C-7.)

Next, it was apparent that some parents involve themselves, while others do not. How do schools go about involving parents who do not get involved? The answer, as has been developed earlier, is that greater parent involvement will follow from more effective Type I and Type S school-home communications.

If greater parent involvement follows from more effective school-home communications and at the same time "new world" school-home communications require parent involvement as a precondition, how can we extricate ourselves from this seemingly circular problem? The answer Gotts (1983b) and AEL came up with was that you have to begin to find out how to go about providing for these more effective communications from the parents themselves. In other words, you can use home-to-school communications to find out about how to improve school-to-home communications.

More specifically, Gotts (1983b) advocates the use of personalized (telephone) interviews with parents to find out what they are thinking. Do they have communications as often as they would like? What else do they want the school to communicate and how? What can be done to make the school's existing channels of communication work more effectively? Gotts asserted that interviews would yield far richer answers to these questions than the typically impersonal paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Indeed, AEL research indi-

cated that "95 percent or more of all parents contacted agreed to participate in a brief interview." (Gotts, 1983b, p. C-11.) (Comparing that figure to your recollection of questionnaire returns should prove revealing.) Furthermore, he proposes that parent/community volunteers could conduct the phone interviews for the school.

Application of the Approach

Gotts has applied his ideas about using telephone interviews to communicate with parents about school-home communications in a number of secondary schools in West Virginia, where the method met with success and was well received. The reasons for focusing initially on high schools were: 1) relatively greater numbers of studies and information were available on early childhood and elementary school practices and 2) there are more pressing communication-linked bottlenecks that need attention in the secondary schools because of the dynamics of parent-adolescent relationships in our society.

Next, we will briefly describe the method that was used in one community and then look at a sample of the results it yielded.

METHOD

Arrangements were made with a large (around 35,000 students) West Virginia county school system to conduct the study as a collaborative activity. This system was selected because it was implementing: (a) interim reporting of unsatisfactory coursework progress, one-half way into each grading period--thereby allowing time for corrective action and (b) prompt notification of parents when a student is absent, with unexcused absences carrying penalties when they exceed a specified limit. Two high schools (labelled H, N=802, and S, N=548) within the system were selected for study because they (a) reputedly engaged in additional examplary practices and (b) had a desired variety

of urban and rural families of varying socioeconomic levels.

Principals from the two schools initially discussed with us their own questions regarding their practices of school-home relations. Although approached individually, there was remarkable similarity in the two principals' questions. We were, thus, able to construct essentially identical interview protocols for the two school. They approved final versions of the interview forms, after which they assisted us with sample selection.

Within each school an oversampling procedure was used to yield an expected final participation rate of 60 families per school. Families were selected to represent about equal numbers of 10th, 11th, and 12th graders and equal numbers of boys and girls within grade--e.g., 10 girls and 10 boys in grade 10, etc. Sample selection was performed at random, within the foregoing groups except that no family was contacted if its telephone number was unlisted to the public. Emergency locator cards at the schools indicated that virtually all families could be reached by telephone at home or work or through some emergency number.

The interview had been designed to require 15-20 minutes for completion. It sought to document (1) actual school-home communication practices as experienced by these parents, (2) their reactions to these, (3) suggestions for improved practices, and (4) views of what, from a parental perspective, might work at the secondary level. All customary "protection of human subjects" procedures were followed, and families were asked at the interview's termination to indicate any remaining questions or comments which they might have had.

A technical report containing the interviews and coding procedures is available from AEL (1982). Both structured and open-ended questions were used. Coding relied heavily on content analyses. Measures were taken to reduce re-

sponding purely on the basis of social desirability. A separate validity study of the interview with 90 families suggested that it was satisfactory for the present purposes (Gotts, 1983c).

RESULTS

Final sampling figures for schools H and S were 66 and 65, respectively. Actual numbers of respondents varied from question to question depending upon how many persons responded and the codability of their answers. The two schools were pooled and compared for possible differences in parent orientation as a function of either child's sex or grade level. Neither factor was associated with parent orientation toward or experience of school-family communications. Therefore, all subsequent analyses were conducted without regard to child grade level or sex.

Next, the two schools were compared to one another. Parents from the two schools experienced school-home communications quite similarly and shared kindred orientations toward the relative value of particular efforts of the schools to communicate with them. Only a small number of exceptions to this generalization were encountered and those were on questions about which the principals had suggested the schools had markedly different emphases. For example, school H had had student workers call parents about absences, which practice was not as favorably received by parents as calls from adults only. (Note - Frequencies presented were found to be statistically significant unless otherwise noted and statistical results can be obtained by referring to Gotts, 1983d.)

It now became possible to describe for each school the typical parent responses to individual practices. Treated in this way, findings for the two schools can be viewed as corroborating one another in independent samples.

A majority of parents attend extracurricular activities at the schools (H = 73.8%; S = 65.1%). Athletic events account for the larger part of this attendance. By way of contrast, although both schools have parent advisory councils and parent meetings, overwhelmingly parents do not attend these (H = 77%; S = 68.3%). That is, a majority of parents attend special purpose extracurricular events, whereas a majority do not attend general purpose parent meetings.

At both schools parents were highly aware of participating in school-home communications (H = 95.1%; S = 91.8%). Newsletters, which both high schools provided, were the most salient (i.e., most likely to be first mentioned) and most often mentioned means of communication. Up to four types of communication were coded for each respondent. These resulted in high reported cumulative exposure to newsletters (H = 86.8%; S = 73.0%). Attitudes toward newsletters, when mentioned, were rated on a three point scale. Favorable reactions predominated (H = 60.8%; S = 71.7%), with unfavorable reactions being rare (H = 2.0%; S = 4.3%). We could also determine from the content of parents' remarks whether they read the newsletters, merely scanned or casually read them, or did not use them. Of those with ratable mentions, most parents read the newsletters (H = 76.7%; S = 86.4%). Less than 10 percent of parents at each school failed to read or ignored the newsletters they received. Parents, moreover, often commented spontaneously on the issue of whether information in the newsletters reached them in a timely manner (H = 24.6%; S = 34.9%). Such mentions were most often complaints if news arrived late.

A majority of parents had some personal contact with school personnel (H = 70.5%; S = 68.3%), although the actual frequency of contact was coded as only "occasional." The occasions prompting such contacts were quite

varied within the school, when coded into nine content categories. Occasions across schools also showed considerable variation. From this it is apparent that there are multiple reasons or occasions for contact, and that provision needs to be made for them all (e.g., for academic, athletic, attendance, behavioral, early departure, extracurricular activities, scheduling).

Regarding interim academic progress reports (i.e., half way into a grading period), parents were largely aware of the practice (H = 75.4%; S = 85.7%). If aware, most considered this practice useful or helpful (H = 78.6%; S = 94%). The difference in awareness between schools only approached statistical significance (p greater than .05), whereas the judgment of the practice's utility was significantly different (p less than .05). These differences corresponded to a somewhat expanded notification practice by school S. Somewhat under a majority of parents acted upon this information (those acting: H = 45.9%; S = 50.7%). Actions taken fall within a restricted range of options, suggesting the need to provide additional information that might lay out more possible actions for parents to consider.

When asked how serious a child's problem or difficulty at school should be before parents are notified, parents overwhelmingly wished to be notified either of everything of potential significance (H = 57.4%; S = 68.3%) or of many named problems (H = 37.7%; S = 30.2%). Only 1.5 to 3.3 percent of parents did not wish to know about a child's problems at school. This sizeable expression of parental interest in being informed contrasts with the often expressed assumption that they are disinterested.

CONCLUSIONS

Parents reacted positively to receiving two types of information from high schools: (1) newsletters detailing the school's program and extra-

curricular events and (2) notification that their child was having difficulty or needed some kind of assistance or corrective action. They expressed a desire to help under the latter circumstances but were not highly resourceful regarding kinds of actions to consider. It appears, thus, that schools will need also to provide guidance to parents about effective courses of action to consider. Parents of high schoolers, contrary to stereotype, appear to have strong interest in how their children are faring in school. They wish generally to express this interest on an as-needed basis--that is, whenever the school notifies them of a problem about which they may wish to become involved. All of this suggests that schools can efficiently operate a communications program for high schoolers' parents by relying on a dual strategy: (1) regular and timely newsletter communication, (2) early notification of parents, together with brief follow-up suggestions, whenever potential problems arise academically or behaviorally.

When presented with the study's findings for each school, the respective principals reported that they found surprises and received results that generally had been unavailable to them. They tended spontaneously to make remarks about how they could use the information developed to confirm what they were already doing as well as to further improve their efforts in the future.

Additional Applications

Since the initial exploratory study, similar interviews have been conducted with several hundred parents from four counties. The general findings reported above have been encountered repeatedly across sites and family circumstances.

REFERENCES

AEL. Interviews and Coding Procedures for Assessing School-Family Communications. Charleston, West Virginia: AEL, Inc., 1982.

Futrell, M. H. President's Viewpoint: Parents as Allies. NEA Today, November, 1983, p. 2.

Gotts, E. E. Parent Involvement Helps... Alabama Community Education... Parents and Learning News, September, 1983a, 1 (2), p. C-7.

Gotts, E. E. Home Communications Needed. Alabama Community... Parents and Learning News, September, 1983b, 1 (2), p. C-11.

Gotts, E. E. Home-Based Early Intervention. In A. W. Childs and G. B. Melton (Eds.), Rural Psychology, New York: Plenum Press, 1983c.

Gotts, E. E. School-Home Communications at the Secondary Level. Paper presented at the AERA Conference in Montreal in April, 1983d.

Lightfoot, S. L. Worlds Apart - Relationships Between Families and Schools. New York: Basic Books, 1978.

Naisbitt, J. Megatrends - Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives. New York: Warner Books, 1982.

Toffler, A. The Third Wave. New York: Bantram, 1980.